

January 2017

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Recommended Citation

Janette Linares and Cara Maffini. "Intersections of Culture and Trauma: Understanding Identities and Experiences of Salvadoran Refugee College Students" *National Multicultural Conference & Summit* (2017).

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Intersections of Culture and Trauma: Understanding Identities and Experiences of Salvadoran Refugee College Students



Janette Linares, M.A. & Cara S. Maffini, Ph.D.

Background and Need

- Twelve-year Civil War in El Salvador displaced thousands leading many to seek safety in other countries (Menjivar, 2000)
- War, migration, and resettlement are three compounding layers of trauma that impact the psychological well-being of Salvadoran refugees (Abrego, 2014; Jenkins, 1991)
- Children of Salvadoran refugees often balance their parents' struggle and sacrifice caused by war, while also trying to forge their own path in the United States
- Majority of Salvadorans students currently enrolled in higher education are first-generation to college
- This study examines how historical and contemporary traumas, refugee experiences, and cultural adjustment impact Salvadoran students' identities and experiences in higher education.

Research Questions

1. How do past and present traumas impact Salvadoran Americans' experiences and identities?
2. How are Salvadoran American students' experiences different from other Latino groups?
3. How can institutions of higher education better support first-generation Salvadoran students' experiences?

Method

- Grounded theory
- Ten undergraduate students (80% female) ranging from 18-25 years old ($M = 21.10$, $SD = 2.60$)
- Six participants were born in El Salvador and migrated between the ages of 3-16
- Participants were first-generation to college

Results

| Selective Codes | Axial Codes | Open Codes |
|---|--|--|
| I. War & Trauma | A. Forced migration | 1. Seeking safety in United States during Civil War |
| | | 2. Limited opportunities after the Civil War (e.g., not being able to find a job) |
| | B. Silence | 3. Lack of discussion about the War within the family |
| | | 4. Lack of discussion about the War for those who grew up in El Salvador |
| | | 5. Lack of knowledge about their history led to confusion about cultural identity |
| | | 6. Unspoken/implicit awareness of how family members were impacted by the War |
| | | 7. Feeling unsafe while in El Salvador |
| | | 8. Feeling unsafe persists even though they are in the United States |
| | C. Fear | 9. Concerns that family still in El Salvador are in danger |
| | | 10. Movie about Civil War in El Salvador |
| II. Challenges | D. Educational spaces became catalyst to discuss the war | 11. School project |
| | | 12. Ethnic studies class |
| | | 13. Student organizations |
| | | 14. Feeling misunderstood and overshadowed under pan-ethnic (Latino) label |
| | E. Social/interpersonal challenges | 15. Impacted by negative stereotypes about Latinos |
| | | 16. Feeling as though they do not belong in United States |
| | F. Challenges of being first generation in higher education | 17. Lack of preparation as they enter higher education |
| | | 18. Lack of guidance and support in school |
| | | 19. Parents cannot support students due to lack of knowledge of higher education process |
| | | 20. Financial constraints |
| III. Advocacy | G. Advocacy through education | 21. Documentation status |
| | | 22. Drive to learn about Salvadoran history |
| | H. Responsibility and empowerment | 23. Pursuing higher education |
| | | 24. Promote conversations about Salvadoran history and culture |
| | | 25. Serve as role model and mentor for other Salvadorans |
| | | 26. Connect with those in El Salvador |
| | I. Desire to create safe spaces for advocacy through community | 27. Form community with other Salvadoran students |
| | | 28. Form community with other Latino students |
| | | 29. Share pride about Salvadoran history, culture, and identity |
| | | 30. Responsibility to succeed |
| IV. Opportunities & Growth | J. Success through degree attainment | 31. Having the opportunity to attend higher education |
| | | 32. Pride in being first in family to attend college |
| | | 33. Hope for future |
| | | 34. Access to counseling services to process |
| | | 35. Opportunity to develop coping skills |
| | K. Psychological needs | 36. Information and preparation beginning in high school (e.g., financial aid) |
| | | 37. Access and clarity regarding eligibility for resources |
| | | 38. Retention services |
| | L. Academic needs for first generation students | 39. Inclusive agendas in ethnic resource centers |
| | | 40. Student organizations |
| 41. Courses addressing Central American history and culture | | |
| M. Cultural needs | | |

Discussion & Implications

- Findings demonstrate how the influences of trauma, a desire to advocate for and educate others, as well as how challenges and perceived opportunities in the United States and higher education contribute to the complex identities held by Salvadoran college students
- ### Salvadoran Student Identity
- Ramifications of the War, migration, and adjustment in the U.S., and intergenerational transmission of trauma were experienced in different ways
 - Many reported an unspoken awareness that conversations about the War and reported learning about their history through school and sociocultural experiences in college
- ### Support from Institutions of Higher Education
- Enrollment in higher education in the United States was a clear marker of opportunity and success among participants
 - Challenges were both social and institutional
 - Salvadoran students expressed a lack of knowledge and unpreparedness as they entered and navigated through higher education
 - Respondents expressed a need to seek support services such as a counseling to help them heal from the past wounds and develop coping skills
- ### Counseling Implications
- Counselors should consider using culturally-responsive interventions that integrate trauma and cultural adjustment
 - Explore dimensions of identity
 - Help clients identify support network
 - Conduct outreach events in conjunction with cultural centers to give space for Salvadoran voices and identity; promote awareness of ethnic differences among Latinos
 - Outreach to social support groups and student organizations to promote safe space
 - Help clients identify ways in which trauma and refugee experiences affected their identity